

Unified Courts for Families Program

Coordinating the Needs of Family and Juvenile Justice

Domestic cases are the fastest-growing area of civil litigation in the United States. In California, juvenile and family cases constituted 40 percent of all civil cases filed in superior courts during the 2001–2002 fiscal year. A significant number of those involved litigants who had multiple cases being handled in family, juvenile, probate, or criminal court.

Such cases generally address complex issues of domestic violence, child abuse, or substance abuse. Say, for example, that a dissolution case with child custody issues is filed in the family law department, and that one of the parents in the case is a restrained person in a [Domestic Violence Prevention Act](#) case with a former spouse. If there is no method for identifying the related case, the judicial officer hearing the child custody matter may not have access to important information that could affect the custody decision. As a result, the [Judicial Council's Operational Plan](#) includes the objective “to improve courts’ management of family and children’s cases, with particular emphasis on unifying and coordinating court procedures.”

In 2003, the Judicial Council selected seven “mentor courts” to focus on unification or coordination of family, juvenile, or probate matters and to teach other courts about their processes. By the end of three years, these courts—Butte and Glenn Counties (in collaboration), Del Norte, Los Angeles, Napa, Placer, San Joaquin, and Yolo Counties—will have created rules or protocols to address many issues, including

- Identifying families with cases in more than one division or courtroom
- Sharing appropriate information to advise judicial officers about existing orders
- Notifying court-connected services that members of a client family are involved in other related matters before the courts
- Ensuring safety and security for family and juvenile court participants and staff

The courts will also be able to provide evidence of accessible services, including facilities designed to meet the needs of families and children; implement calendaring methods to coordinate multiple court appearances; and develop case-tracking methods to expedite cases where appropriate.

Achieving Important Goals

The Unified Courts for Families program directly addresses two goals established in the Judicial Council’s strategic plan: Goal I, Access, Fairness, and Diversity; and Goal IV, Quality of Justice and Service to the Public. In 2006, the work of the mentor courts will be shared with other courts statewide. In June 2005, at its second annual meeting, the Unified Courts for Families program presented an Interim Evaluation Report, highlighting several of its achievements.

Impacts

- In 2004, the Center for Families, Children, and the Courts (CFCC) published the *Unified Courts for Families Deskbook* to help courts move forward with unification and coordination. The CFCC distributed the deskbook to California's family and juvenile courts and makes it available on its Web site (www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/).
- Each mentor court has protocols or rules to ensure that its information-sharing policy complies with legal mandates to protect confidential information.
- Nearly all the courts report increased levels of collaboration between the court and the community.
- Some courts report increased levels of communication within their courts. Family law courts have become more familiar with juvenile court policies and procedures and vice versa.
- Several program stakeholders report that the unified court effort encouraged a shift in the court culture toward a system that is more user-friendly and more effective in meeting the needs of litigants.
- Preliminary anecdotal information suggests that the program helps judicial officers feel they can make more informed decisions and avoid issuing conflicting orders.

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